

Better Together's campaign creates a strategic dilemma for Scottish Labour

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*Polls in Scotland have until recently shown a consistent narrowing of the gap between Yes and No, causing worry in the cross-party Better Together campaign led by former Labour Chancellor, Alistair Darling. With a pro-independence campaign that is very active in working class areas of Scotland, the Labour party is now playing a stronger hand. But by committing some of its senior Scottish figures, Labour runs the very real risk of being associated with the widely loathed Conservatives, writes **Craig McAngus**.*



Rumours are swirling that Alistair Darling has been sidelined as Better Together chief after a meeting between David Cameron, Nick Clegg and Danny Alexander, although this has been vehemently denied by Better Together. Although the media (particularly the *Daily Mail*, who broke the story) have seized on this as an important and significant development, it quite simply points to what's been fairly obvious for quite some time: that the UK government is deeply concerned with how the campaign for a No vote in September's referendum is unfolding.

There is legitimate cause for concern on their part. Opinion polls have shown a consistent narrowing of the gap between Yes and No since late 2013, and there are constant criticisms of Better Together's perceived negativity from pro-UK figures, most notably former First Minister Henry McLeish. The majority of the Scottish public, according to a recent poll reported in *The Herald*, also believe that Better Together is running a negative campaign, with 53% assessing the campaign as negative compared to 29% believing the same about Yes Scotland. Up until recently, Better Together had focussed primarily on making the case AGAINST Independence rather than the one FOR the UK. Despite now trying to address that imbalance by pointing out the potential for more devolved powers for Scotland within the UK, it will be difficult to overturn the perception that it is a campaign clouded in negativity.

Perhaps a clearer sign that pro-UK strategists are worried is that of the hand that the Labour party has now decided to play. The Guardian reported on Wednesday 14th May that Scottish Labour 'big beasts', namely John Reid, Douglas Alexander and Jim Murphy, have been drafted in to help 'beef up' Better Together. Gordon Brown is also set to play a greater role. The apparent rationale for this move is that there is concern that a sizeable proportion of Scotland's working-class men are being converted to a Yes vote and that decisive measures must be taken in order to counter this.

Labour strategists would have ideally liked to avoid this situation, but the work that has been going on 'on the ground' by Yes Scotland and other pro-independence groups such as the Radical Independence Campaign (RIC) has forced their hand. The Yes campaign, broadly defined, far outstrips Better Together in terms of activists who are willing to give up significant amounts of their time in order to canvass voters on the doorstep. The RIC, for example, has been very active, registering voters and having conversations with them about independence and the potential for Scotland to adopt radical, socialist policies once independent statehood has been achieved, particularly in areas of Glasgow and Dundee that have traditionally voted Labour. Their aim is to inspire the working classes in the way that Labour are perceived to have done so in the past.

The polls are showing that such efforts are working. Whether Labour's strategic intervention can halt the progress the Yes vote has been making remains to be seen. Nevertheless, this remains a move that party strategists would rather not have made had they had the choice. Given the state of the polls, a comprehensive No vote (say 65%) looks very unlikely and letting things run their course is no longer an option. By committing some of its most senior Scottish figures to Better Together, Labour runs the very real risk of being associated with the Conservatives who are still widely loathed in many areas of Scotland. Furthermore, recent opinion polls suggest the party has a tough fight

on its hands if it wants to win the 2015 general election, with Ed Miliband lagging significantly behind David Cameron in some key personal indicators that pollsters regularly measure. The party is also substantially behind the SNP in terms of voting intentions for the 2016 Scottish election. Indeed, one could quite conceivably have a No vote in September followed by a Conservative-led government in Westminster and an SNP government at Holyrood. This scenario would provide the SNP with the ammunition to blame Labour for selling Scotland out over independence and subjecting the country to the full wrath of the Conservatives' austerity agenda, despite Ed Balls' commitment to broadly maintaining current coalition spending plans.

There is still a lot of water to flow under the bridge in the four months between now and September's referendum. The upcoming European elections are a significant milestone on the road to the referendum and it remains to be seen what political cards the result deals both sides of the independence debate. Scottish Labour is in the invidious position of potentially being on the winning side of the referendum but being left out in the cold when it comes to the UK and Scottish elections respectively. They could have a reasonable amount to gain from a No vote, but they certainly have a lot to lose.

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